

## WOMEN OF THE BLUE LAKE

By No. 399

*An interesting insight into the psychology of a group of imprisoned women and, in their admirable restraint and matter-of-factness, a fine example of human ability to rise above misery and despair, are these pages from the diary written by an inmate of a women's internment camp in Java. Human nature, it seems, is better fitted to withstand serious tragedies than petty annoyances and incompetence which are likely to call forth anger and bitterness, whereas great losses often furnish us with the inner strength necessary to overcome them. And if everything fails there is always a "blue lake" to which to turn for solace from the pettiness of man.—K.M.*

*May 13, 1940, Whit Monday  
Somewhere in Java*

Endless waiting in continuous fear. What is to happen to us all? We don't know. We don't know anything at all. We are worn out from the long, hot train trip in the prison car. No one knew where we were being taken by the stony-faced police officers. The windows were kept closed the whole way. After the train journey we went on in old motor vans, rattling and shaking further and further into the country, far away, where there were no more villages and no more people. A terrific thunderstorm broke. Then evening came quickly, with its mist and and croaking frogs. When at last we were allowed to get out it was night. We saw soldiers with bayonets, and a wall; then a huge gate, which opened to let us in; then barbed wire, triple—and finally a large, old building from which a dim light shone across to us. That was all.

Now we are sitting on boxes and rough benches, hundreds of women and children, waiting for our luggage and persons to be searched. Some of the children are on the point of collapse from fatigue, leaning against their mothers, their eyes closed. Some have simply lain down on the dirty cold stone floor. Others are crying and asking for something to drink. I, too, am parched with thirst. One is no longer conscious of hunger. My head is buzzing with a burning headache.

Some have been called to be searched. We others are waiting, in an almost unnatural silence, for the inspection. Suddenly—a piercing cry. We start. It is followed by whimpering, and a commanding voice. Then everything is quiet again. When the first women come back, they show their hands in a mute gesture. Now their last piece of jewelry, which at first they had been allowed to keep, has been taken from them—their wedding rings. In a minute it will be my turn.

*May 14, Early Morning*

It was a long time before we were taken into the dark rooms of the old house last night. Rough wooden bunks with dark, bulky straw-filled sacks stood close together, and a smell of decay came to us from the mildewy walls. Rats were flying around the single dusty electric light bulb, and rats, disturbed in their peace, squeaked in protest. At first we stared dumfounded at our new surroundings, but then pulled ourselves together, first those with children, who saw to it that they had somewhere to lie down. Mrs. L. discovered a large tin urn with lukewarm drinking water, which we all made for to quench our burning thirst. Some wanted to wash, but fled in horror from the revolting lavatory. Our luggage—one suitcase apiece—was not handed out that evening so that we had to spend this night, too, in the same clothes which we had not taken off for three days.

Most of the children were already in the deep sleep of exhaustion, while we women were still staring apprehensively and unbelievably at our new surroundings, trying to be calm and to grasp the fact that we had to face a different life. What will this new life be like? Tonight we have realized that we had been the happiest of people before all this. Our husbands, brothers, sons were led away before our eyes as prisoners, our homes and belongings have been taken from us. Only the younger children were left with us, and for their sakes we must try with all our might to master this new life. From the corner, where Mrs. W. sat crouching, came a loud sobbing. Several of the women were crying, but, thank God, there were others who had the strength to comfort them and give them courage.

This was the moment at which a certain numbness in me, too, gave way. I looked out of the window. The night was quite dark; only now and again the country was lit up by short summer lightning, and then I thought I could see a large sheet of water, something like a lake. I sat down with the others near the window. It was still hot and stifling in the house and none of us grownups could think of sleeping.

The doors of the room had meanwhile been closed, we had heard the rusty keys turn twice, and the last little light had been extinguished. We hardly felt tired, nor did we bother about the many mosquitoes that were biting us. We just turned our thoughts over and over in our minds, pondering and trying to muster our courage, for everything seemed so desperate. No one spoke a word. Everyone was occupied with herself and her own thoughts. So the night passed.

Again and again our burning eyes had tried to pierce the darkness of the night, till the first dawn of the new day broke. True enough, there lay before us a large, spreading lake, and, as the day grew lighter, its water turned bluer and bluer. When the sun

rose, we all seemed to feel a deep quietness flowing up to us from the dimly shimmering, clear water. It was as if a breath of the eternal were drifting across to us. The material things in life became small and insignificant, went under in this great expanse of water. I had to think of Goethe's words, praising water as the symbol of the human soul: "It comes down from heaven, it rises up to heaven, and down again to earth it must come, changing eternally."

That was how the first day of our new life dawned. We looked at each other calmly, and I believe that we all felt the same determination to bear together the future and all the hardships it might bring.

### *Same Evening*

That is as far as I got this morning when we were all startled by a loud and vigorous bugle call, the military reveille. A few minutes later one of our women guards appeared and called out: "*Aantreden* (fall in)!" We had to march in pairs to the dining room, past the women guards in their uniforms, who then posted themselves in the corners of the dining room in order to keep us constantly under observation. We marched up to rows of long wooden tables and benches. On the tables there were tin plates and mugs. A whistle was blown twice. The first time meant, "sit down," the second was the signal to eat.

This morning duties were distributed. Even old women, including our oldest with her 83 years, were given work to do. Camp regulations were read out; everything was very strict, and there was a lot to be learnt. Indeed, never having done work of that kind in the tropics, we have first to learn, not only to sweep the rough stone floors clean, but to wipe them several times with a wet mop, to carry the heavy straw sacks into the sun every day, to fetch the large urns of drinking water punctually, etc. Strictest obedience is taken for granted.

The camp regulations see to it that the days will pass in constant work, mostly of a physical nature, a sort of "work therapy." We submitted. There is enough discipline among us, and we want the days to pass without friction.

We know now what our camp is called: *Banjoe biroe*, Malayan for "Blue Lake."

*May 24*

Days of getting accustomed to conditions, of adjustment, difficult days of self-control have passed meanwhile. The children are still a problem. There are a few teachers here, but there is as yet no building or schoolroom available. We are not even allowed to speak our own language. That is liable to heavy punishment, such as solitary confinement or being put on rice and water. But during the siesta, when all doors around us have shut, we give the children lessons, after having built desks and chairs for them out of empty suitcases. We have quite got used to the bugle which is for ever summoning us, even to every meal.

If sometimes the burden placed upon us seems to grow too heavy, or if our good spirits are depressed by petty annoyances caused by some of the guards, we only have to look up to the blue sky and the sun and to our beloved lake, from whose smooth mirror not only coolness is wafted to us but also the breath of a pure, clear, true world. It gives us back our peace and composure.

*May 27*

Every day we are getting to be more like a big family. By no means do we love the old gray house, but all the more every little piece of ground outside, be it ever so small, on which we are allowed to walk. We can observe, better than through the barred windows of the building, the lake on one side, on the other the mountains, trees, and rice and tapioca fields.

We are allowed to walk on a narrow strip of ground around the house. Every free moment is used to walk the length of this bumpy path at least once, and we are usually able to leave our gloomy thoughts behind us.

Today the first punishment has been meted out—solitary confinement. Some visiting Dutch friends had shown one of our women her child through the barbed wire. It had been ill in hospital the day we were interned, and she had not seen it since. Naturally she wanted to get nearer to her child, wanted to hold it in her arms. But she was denied this. She had a complete nervous breakdown, and began to scream. Immediate solitary confinement was the reply of the camp authorities.

*June 10*

We are getting more and more used to things, and the unaccustomed work goes faster and faster. Washing laundry at the big well in the mornings is quite gay. It is the time when the guards are having their breakfast, and we have a little more freedom then. Although the singing of German songs is strictly forbidden, we continue to risk it and we are doubly cheered for the whole day.

*June 17*

The first post cards from our imprisoned husbands have arrived. Tremendous excitement! We had seen the Directress going around with a fat bundle of cards before the midday meal: during the meal our excitement rose to such a pitch that no one even thought of eating. At last, the distribution! I received a card too, and like all the others it contained only good news. In some of the cards, it is true, only the heading and signature could be read, everything else had been blacked out. The censorship was very strict. But we all were happy and grateful, and in spite of the distance we felt more than ever united with our husbands.

The happiness of us married women spread also to the few unmarried ones, and when at sunset, which was today



an opalescent mass of purple, red, and gold, we looked across to our lake, it had, as if in celebration, put on a red and golden holiday gown that was so fabulously beautiful that we shall never forget it.

### *June 29*

My heart is still pounding. I just happened to be present when two of our women were officially notified of the sale of their confiscated property, which they have now lost once and for all. One of the women took it bravely and with composure, but the other one began to sob, softly at first, then more and more uncontrollably, till in the end she threw herself on her straw sack and screamed and screamed, unable to stop. Mrs. M., who knows something about medicine and acts as our doctor, was called. She gave her a "nerve tonic," and after a full hour at last the screaming stopped.

### *July 5*

Every day some of us receive official notification about the irretrievable sale of our property. It will come for all of us one day; I am waiting for this notice too. In my heart I have already settled the matter, I am already beyond these things, like most of the other women.

### *July 13*

This has been a special day. It was the birthday of Mrs. S. of our ward. Very early in the morning, before the bugle call and the appearance of our guards, the older boys came from the boys' barracks and produced a so-called "festival rocket" by comically imitating in chorus the hiss and explosion of a rocket. Then all the women and children came to offer their congratulations. Everybody brought a little present, even if it was only a homemade ornament consisting of a colored crochet cord with a pierced and polished one-cent coin as a pendant, which one of the children had secretly managed to

keep in a little bag. In the evening we all gathered again in the newly-opened canteen and drank the health of Mrs. S. in a glass of lemonade. We have now become quite used to speaking Dutch all the time, and in spite of the restrictions here and there the day has been a very happy one for us, because it brought out so strongly the community spirit amongst us. It has given us renewed strength and has brought us all closer together.

Before going to bed we felt, as we do almost every evening, the desire to get close to our lake. Whether it reflects the silver moon and the stars in the evening or the sun and the blue sky during the day, it always has the same power to quiet our hearts, to make us feel freer and lighter.

### *July 20*

More and more cases of illness. The heat and the long spell of dryness bring this with them every year. At the moment dysentery and malaria are predominant. We tremble for many who are seriously ill. Mrs. M. goes untiringly from room to room to distribute properly the medicine which is given to her so sparingly. When a call was made today for volunteers to nurse the sick, twice as many applied as were needed.

### *August 10*

We have been here three months, living our strange life far from the great events in the world, of which we know nothing. What is happening in the war on the Western Front? The camp authorities are as strict as they were on the first day, and no newspapers are allowed. But rumors are beginning to creep in, and one of these has already become a firm belief. It is that we are to be freed on August 15. No one knows where the rumor originated, but all are preparing for their liberation. A great "festival evening" is being arranged which is supposed to be a sort of farewell. Will our hopes be fulfilled?

*August 15, 7 p.m.*

It has been a festive day. Our beloved lake was even bluer than usual and saluted us in shining sunlight. No announcement was made by the authorities during the midday meal, but the confident mood has remained. The "festival program" has been submitted to the camp authorities, both the Colonel and the Directress, for approval and permission to perform. Most of it was in Dutch, of course, but we had written the play and the "canon" in German. With much shaking of heads and muttered remarks like "crazy" and "cracked," the program was okayed. And so it took place. The children had rehearsed a wonderful afternoon show with dances, games, and singing. Then the grownups performed the play they had written themselves, containing a little parody of our life in camp, and after that we all sang the farewell canon with its closing line: "Farewell, Blue Lake, farewell."

*August 16*

We are still here.

*August 20*

Still nothing has happened. Spirits are rather low. Mail from our husbands is always cheerful, always optimistic. But why is nothing being done about us? Why doesn't the big gate open to let us free? No, nothing is done, simply nothing.

At sunset I took our usual walk around the building with the children, and when the sun was gone we looked in the sky for our big star and our little one, which are not far from each other and about whom the children have invented a long and beautiful story. The big star is the father and the little star is the mother, and there are a lot of star-children around them. If the star-children have been very good, the father star and the mother star get a little closer to each other every day, and the children also move a little closer, and then the star family will soon all be together again. But that is only a fairy tale invented by children.

[In January 1942 the approach of the Japanese forces caused the Dutch authorities to remove the internment camp for German men from Sumatra to India.—The Editor]

*August 25*

Today the gray house, that is so often loud and gay with the voices of children and their laughter, is again strangely silent on the shore of the dark blue lake. There is an atmosphere of expectation, of mystery. The time has come for a child to be born. All the women are sitting around, quietly sharing the feelings of the mother who writhes in pain, cared for in a bare room by a doctor and a midwife from their own group. All are waiting tensely for the first cry of the child, all seem to be holding their breath.

*Same Evening*

Thank God, it is over now. A healthy girl has been born, and everybody is happy again. Congratulations with homemade flowers and other presents are pouring into the room of the mother, who, although pale, looks happily again and again at her child.

*October 15*

We have all gradually got used to the fact that after all the gates will not be opened so soon, and every one of us works off and conquers this great disappointment in her own manner. Those are best off who have their steady daily work, or who are mothers with their own children to keep them occupied. Those who can paint or draw are producing the loveliest works of art, and many put down in verse or in prose the thoughts passing through their minds. Others who have a gift for storytelling entertain their roommates in the evening with their interesting travel adventures. Some who can sing, very softly intone some of the old home songs every evening, which are then hummed by all. And the lake sparkles across to them in quiet understanding.

*December 31*

It is five to twelve, five minutes before the New Year begins. Advent and Christmas are behind us, thank God. They have been sad days. I found it impossible to write down anything. We had no Christmas. Although the Directress has always tried to behave absolutely correctly toward us, I shall never be able to forget that on Christmas Eve she went from room to room to see that there was no forbidden little candle burning and that no *wanklanken* (dissonances) should meet her ear. Our Christmas carols were forbidden on pain of special punishment. It was raining outside and everything was dull and gray and quiet, just as it is now. Our lake, too, is sad with us, and the low mist lying on it can tell us nothing about next year, about the future. Almost all the women have gone to bed and have drawn their mosquito nets close around their straw sacks, to be alone, quite alone. Alone with their thoughts about their husbands, their homes, their future. I can hear a clock striking twelve somewhere—the New Year has begun.

*March 23*

Many weeks have passed again. Many things have happened. Six more healthy

children have been born, and many a friend has been very ill. But on the whole providence has been kind—there has been no death.

There is a new rumor that the gates will open.

*March 25*

The gates *have* opened. Soon, perhaps next month, we shall be going north on a Japanese steamer, to Shanghai or Kobe, and then on to our homes in Germany. Some of us have even had our wedding rings returned. In brilliant sunshine we blissfully walked in a long procession, slowly, step by step toward freedom, leaving behind us the gray building, seeing only the Blue Lake, looking at it again and again in parting, full of gratitude. On its shores we have lived through much that was new and strange. I believe, however, that the most important thing is that the small, everyday things no longer mean anything to us and that we have moved a little closer to greater things, to the eternal values.

And like a flower of farewell I carry along the simple words spoken to us women as we were leaving by one of the guards: "Through you we have learnt in these months that these words can become true: 'Love your enemies.'"

## AFTER THE RAIN

By Wei Li Bo

No sound is heard  
But drops falling  
From leaf to leaf.  
That speck of light  
Upon the shrub?  
A butterfly.